

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 173

JC 030 017

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TITLE Writing with Consequence: On-Line Collaboration and Desktop Publishing in a First-Year Writing Course.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper contributed to the Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference, "Best Practices in Delivering, Supporting, and Managing Online Learning" (4th, Kapiolani Community College, April 7-9, 1999).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: <http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/tcon99/dir.html>.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Community Colleges; Computer Mediated Communication; *Cooperation; Distance Education; Internet; *Nontraditional Education; *Online Courses; Two Year Colleges; Virtual Classrooms; *Web Based Instruction; *Writing (Composition)

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author discusses his approaches to making the writing in composition classes matter beyond the giving and getting of a grade, as well as ways of giving the course itself legitimate content. The Electronic Democracy Project (EDP), a national online teaching network whose mission is to instruct students in civic discourse, provided the author with the opportunity to address most of these issues. The EDP, developed as a response to the perceived apathy regarding the political process, invites students from a range of colleges and geographic regions to discuss, debate, and deliberate pressing public issues. The author's first-year community college writing class collaborated with a basic composition course at the University of Rhode Island. The collaboration was, essentially, between working-class and nontraditional students at the community college, and the more traditional and middle-class students at the university. The work was organized into three stages: (1) deliberation; (2) collaboration; and (3) presentation. In the first stage, students enunciated issues of importance to them. In the second phase, students collaborated intensely on a limited number of issues culled from the early discussions, finally choosing a single topic for each group. In the third phase, students shared, in a public and concrete way, the fruits of their research. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/NB)

WRITING WITH CONSEQUENCE: ON-LINE COLLABORATION AND DESKTOP PUBLISHING IN A FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSE

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(Presented online at the 1999 Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference: "Best Practices in Delivering, Supporting, And Managing Online Learning.")

For the last year and a half, I have participated in a national, on-line teaching network called the Electronic Democracy Project (EDP), whose mission is to instruct students in civic discourse. A response to the troubled state of current political rhetoric and to the perceived apathy of many to the political process as a whole, the EDP invites faculty and students from a range of colleges and geographic regions to discuss, debate, and deliberate pressing public issues via email. The experience has been remarkable for both myself and my students, prompting us to deepen our understanding of a writer's audience and purpose. More profoundly, the EDP has encouraged us all to think of ourselves as public beings, not simply isolated individuals.

From a writing teacher's perspective, the experience has helped me resolve what I have for years considered two intractable problems in a first-year writing course: how to make the writing that we do in the course matter beyond the giving and getting of a grade and, relatedly, how to give the course itself a legitimate content. I know that over the years I have benefited enormously by the work of compositionist theorists who have attempted to connect the acts of writing, speaking, and reading with social conventions of communities and thereby bridge the gap between classroom language instruction and language use in the larger world (Heath; Bizzell; Bruffee; Bazerman; Myers). I know that I have learned a great deal from researchers who have studied the writing done in workplace settings and professions and who have prompted me to reflect seriously on the importance of preparing students for that work (Bazerman and Paredes; Spilka, Odell and Goswami, Kogen; Winsor). And I know that I have drawn inspiration from those socially minded scholars who have restored social action to rhetorical communication, enabling me to think of my job as something other than merely academic (Ohmann; Berlin; Miller). For all this work I am exceedingly grateful, but on that Monday morning I am still faced with the intimidating task of convincing students in the universal first year writing course of a two-year college that the writing of this course will have application

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beyond the classroom and that the writing will have consequence beyond evaluation and assessment. The EDP provided me with an opportunity to address many, if not most, of these issues.

I first became involved with the project in the spring of 1997, having replied to a query from Professor Linda Shamoon on a listserv to which I belong. I agreed to have my first-year community college writing class collaborate with Linda's basic composition course at the University of Rhode Island. It seemed an unlikely collaboration between the two classes, given the working class background of my non-traditional, community college students--and, for many of them, a troubled relationship with school--and the more traditional, middle-class students in the university. But it was precisely this difference that excited all of us--the chance to exchange views across borders of class, language and ethnicity.

Our classes subscribed to a listserv which we called Eforum, dedicated to the exploration of and debate over public issues. Our work would be organized into three stages:

- Deliberation
- Collaboration
- Presentation

The first phase involved "acts of publicity" (Shamoon, email, taken from Bohman,), whereby students would enunciate public issues of importance to them (in this first EDP group, we chose global population, teen pregnancy, interfaith marriage, gun control, Internet privacy, and medicinal marijuana use). That would be followed by a second phase, an intense collaboration on a limited number of issues culled from the early discussion. It would be during this phase that students would decide on a single topic that they wished to research and apportion themselves into groups, each group having representation from both colleges. Sharing information from web sites and other sources, students would work to deepen their understanding of the topics at hand. The third phase, the presentation, involved sharing in a public and concrete way, the fruits of their research. Linda's class, as their research project, would produce a desktop published pamphlet to be distributed at the next phase, a face to face debate at the University of Rhode Island. I was very impressed with the idea and would attempt to try it in a future class (as I will soon describe) , but for now my students had a far less ambitious project in preparation for the face to face: analysis of a web site on their topic and a conventional research paper using a variety of web sources. The final phase, as I've indicated, involved the students meeting face to face in a "convention," at which the groups presented their positions

and support for them, entertained questions and points of clarification, enunciated resolutions, which were then voted up or down by the combined group.

I should add that my second experience with the EDP (which took place the following semester) was far more complex than the first. Rather than having merely two classes-just down the highway from each other-- correspond, as we did the first go around, in the fall of 1998 we had several classes participate, from coast to coast. And instead of allowing students to choose their own issues of concern, the teachers involved set up various discrete listservs, each focusing on pre-selected areas (the initial list was comprised of criminal justice, education, environment, language/media, and an open list). Students would then choose two listservs that they wished to subscribe to. As it turned out, a face to face meeting with the regional New England group became impossible for my class to schedule-a real loss, in my view.

Deliberation

In the first stage, the act of exploring and publicizing the issues they felt are important, students are given latitude to voice their opinions on public issues and to do so in ways they chose. As an example one student on our Education98 list expressed an interest in discussing the issue of classroom size. Rather than simply state an opinion on the subject, she provides context for a discussion of the subject, offering President's Clinton's goal of limiting grades 1-3 classrooms to 18 students and to France's status quo of nearly 40 students per class. The move suggested her intention to ground all subsequent discussion and perhaps invite others to critique the information or to provide other contexts. However, Deanna, a student of my own, does not take up the challenge. Here's her post:

- I think forty children in one classroom is way too many. That is a lot for one teacher to handle. Bring the size down to eighteen seems more seneseable [sic]. The children would be allowed more attention if needed, especially grades 1-3. At that age the[y] are just beginning school and that extra attention. I imagine forty children in one classroom being out of control. (Deanna)

Deanna does not add any further context, but simply asserts an opinion, without validating the accuracy of the other student's claim or providing any evidence of her own other than generalizations ("That is a lot for one teacher to handle") or references to the need of young children, who would be given more attention with smaller classes. However, at this early stage in the process (devoted to making public the views of persons on the list) that will be sufficient.

In addition to mere assertion or declaration, students may draw from their own experience as evidence in support of an opinion, sometimes compelling so. Consider this post from Jeff, a student of mine, who rather casually and quickly tells a horrifying story to make his point about violence in "today's society":

- Our society is turning into a jungle. Noone cares anymore about anything. You can't even go for a nice walk at nighttime without wondering if something is going to happen to you. People getting shot, drug overdoses, murders, it's all you see in the news these days. People just don't care. Someone looks at someone the wrong way that's it. Next thing you know there's a brawl going on. People are still prejudice[d], and people are still racist. Things just are not getting better. One of my friends came out of a club a while back and got jumped. We did what we could, but with all the shots he took to his head he died, in the parking lot in my arms. You see it but don't think it's a big of a deal but when it happens to yourself, you feel it. People getting shot over their sneakers and their close [sic]. How ridiculous is that. In my eyes I know there will never be true peace, and people will never get along with everybody, it's sad but it's true, please reply if you'd like to voice an opinion. (Jeff)

Jeff's posting reminds us of the power of narrative but also raised the questions of how to use such an account, how to interpret it in productive ways. All seem affected by the account but few knows what to do with it. Some by pass it altogether and focus on the role of media (television and film) in producing violence. The following is a fairly typical response to Jeff's posting:

- I am sorry about your friend. I worked on an idea similar to this in a recent paper of mine. It deals with respect for society in the media. While my paper focused on respect for sexuality, one thing I found it being compared to is the promotion of violence by newspapers and television programs. When you turn on the television today, it is garunteed you will see something you shouldn't. From sex scandals to random acts of violence, the media has disrupted our sense of vitue and morals. (Lisa)

Since no one else has a story of such power from their own experience, Jeff's story fails to produce any insights applicable to experience beyond his own. Jeff does not stop at telling his story, however. He issues an eloquent plea as well about the power of what he calls "first-hand experience":

- Some topics we will never come to an agreement on. We just end up taking in circles and end up back with nothing. I think people need a first hand experience with some of these topics and maybe then some might change their minds or some might feel a lot stronger about opinions. To go through something and know

what it feels like is totally different then to try see something or write about it without experiencing it. . . .

to listen to someone tell a personal experience, you can feel everything, the tension, the hurt, and it seems more true and real to have someone right in front of you telling you what they feel and how they felt. It would make the listener really want to listen because he has someone in front of them who has gone through it, and would make him relate to it almost as if he has gone through it himself. I think everyone in this group has delt with one of these topics first hand, and could relate and talk about it, even if it wasn't in the topic list [sic]. It would make this project seem real for everyone, to experience someone's elses experience, and to learn from other students stories, and other people's mistakes [sic]. We may never come to an agreement or a conclusion for a lot of these topics, but if a lot of people share their own experiences about them, then it would change a lot of people in this project, and would stay in their minds. That could be the one thing that we all get out of this project, then people could change their ways or think about things a little more before all of us do something that could be racist, discriminating, criminal, etc...

professor Tinberg, and professor Shamoan, I think this would be a good way to finish our project, To hear everyone's experience, and to feel it to[o]! [sic] (Jeff)

I remember being touched by Jeff's plea and continue to be touched by it. But its premise, that a diverse group of students such as this won't agree on issues, closes the door on consensus prematurely. Perhaps it is possible that students, if provided direction, can muster arguments and truly deliberate on a range of complex issues. In that spirit, Linda, for example, provides some context by summarizing studies of media and violence, which suggested that there were a whole host of factors beyond the media at work here. She prompts students to consider more complex causes for such behavior.

Jeff, I am saddened and sorry that you and your friends suffered this way. I don't blame you for your general outrage at the state of a society in which ordinary people are at such dreadful risk every day.

- So far, people on this list seem satisfied with the explanation that the media is at fault. No doubt, the constant barrage of violent images and crime being reporting in the media would seem to be a source for the violence played out on the streets. But I wonder. There are plenty of social scientists (thousands) studying the effect of the media on everyday behavior, and there is no sustained proof from these studies that exposure to such imagery causes violent behavior. As I remember it, there are some studies which seem to indicate that immediately after viewing certain kinds of programs, children (especially boys!) will

act-out in more violent kinds of games, but this is not sustained over time nor is it typically seen in similar studies in adults. It seems to me a more sound thought that the media is reflecting and emphasizing a condition of violence in our society that has other tangled causes. If this is the case, then there must be other factors which sustain the high level of violence in our society. What are the causes? Are they unique to the U. S. Or perhaps we do not, *in fact*, have a society plagued by violence? Some anthropologists and psychologists have suggested that humans are basically violent. I wonder. (Shamoon, Eforum)

After acknowledging the terrible tragedy of Jeff's loss and the moving quality of his story, Linda's tries to move students in another way: toward a more thoughtful deliberation on the issue.

COLLABORATION

The next phase of the project in fact attempts to get students to deepen their understanding of a public issue through collaboration and research. In my first EDP experience, Professor Shamoon and I identified roughly seven topics from the deliberative phase and invited our students to choose a topic that they wish to work on with the other class. Groups would consult on-line and prepare materials for a face to face presentation in Providence, Rhode Island (with Linda's class bringing desktop produced pamphlets in support of positions).

The process was somewhat different the second time around: students had >from the beginning belonged to prearranged listservs, having announced an interest in two topics early on. Since there were so many schools involved, it was impossible to do the kind of small scale collaboration that marked the first experience. Instead, I invited my students to select topics (from the lists) that they thought might be interesting to pursue and to form groups for further research and presentation on the topic. Their goal: to produce a group-designed and composed pamphlet, informing the public about the issue, adopting a position, and suggesting an action plan.

Although my fall of 1998 class would not be producing work with other classes, my students were asked to consult people on the lists for advice, useful web sites, and any other relevant information about their topic. One group of students, as an example, decided that they would be producing a pamphlet on the misunderstandings regarding inter-racial relationships. As a starting point, they consulted people on an email list, asking if any might want to be interviewed on-line on the subject. They received positive responses and conducted interviews for their project, providing the groundwork for their web research on the subject.

On-line collaboration, in my experience with the project, has usually taken the form of swapping interesting web sites, or even exchanging the information on-line. Consider this posting from Kirstie, a University of Rhode Island student, to Jeff and Harmony, two of my students:

Jeff and Harmony,

- Thanks for your interest! I am speaking/writing without Melissa here, of course, but we did some talking today about our topic, so I'll try to fill you in a little. First of all, we found a fantastic website that tells just about everything on overpopulation: <http://www.carnell.com/population/> Then, we decided to define our stance overpopulation as being a situation where it is impossible to provide everyone on earth with basic needs for living: food, clean water, adequate health care, etc. So what we are really concerned with is maybe not so much the numbers of people, but our planets and OUR ability to support them. I typed in some interesting info (below) from that site. It took me a couple of times to slog through some of the numbers, but it was worth it. Please, write your opinions on anything and everything [sic]. We are really still formulation exactly what we want to do, we need your help [sic]! I am glad you're going to do this with us. She goes on to provide an excerpt from a useful site: . . . 88% of population growth from 1990-1995 occurred in Asia and Africa, and the United Nations expects Africa to bear the brunt of population growth in the 20th century. That continent could see its population triple by 2050. By comparison Europe's population is expected to decline by 7 percent by 2050 (Kirstie)

Kirstie is not only providing useful context for the group; she offers a glimpse into her thinking process, specifically the decision to focus on the ability of particular continents to provide their population's basic needs.

Collaboration did not always go smoothly, of course, especially in my first EDP experience. Access was a significant problem. The university students had reliable and thorough access to the Internet (in dorms or at home), whereas my community college students did not. The university students were simply more adept and comfortable with searching the Internet than my own students, most of whom did not own a computer and were relative novices with on-line work. Finally, the university students by and large wrote with more fluency than my own students (who would be greeted each morning with lots of email and lots of text to scroll). Nevertheless, collaboration yielded important contributions from both sides. For example, Zack, a student of my own, offered important direction to the group working on medical uses of marijuana:

I guess we are going to be working together on Legalization of Marijuana for Medical Use. What angle are we going to attack this with [sic].

- I personally feel that marijuana should be legalized for recreational use so you will not get an argument from about legalizing for medical use. However, we need to set some boundaries of what subjects we should cover, such as: Use for help with glaucoma. Use to help cancer patients deal with pain and loss of appetite. Other uses in medicine. I think we should pick one and run with it. Please let me know what you think. (Zack)

PRESENTATION

Beyond the giving and getting of information, the collaboration had this clear purpose: to allow the group to inform others about an important public concern and, perhaps, incite them to action. In the spring of 1997, our face to face encounter in Providence, aimed to produce a series of resolutions which would be voted on by the combined classes. Prior to voting, however, students engaged in consultation as well as exploration of their preconceived beliefs on the issues that would concern us.. That stage was followed by brief presentations by the groups on their various topics and resolutions, in which sleek and professional looking pamphlets were exchanged and discussed. A vote was then taken. Consensus was achieved on all the issues.

The experience in Providence prompted me, the following semester, to work on ways that I could integrate my students' course work more closely with the on-line deliberation and collaboration that the EDP allowed. Inspired by the impressive desktop publishing projects that I saw that day, I planned on having my students engage in a similar project. I admit to some trepidation, because I wondered how my students, who very likely would have no experience with desktop publishing, would react to the assignment. I needed to lay some careful groundwork, for sure.

The assignment would have two parts, one research, and the other design. Students would generate a list of topics, drawn from our on-line work that they might want to probe more deeply and asked that each student commit to working with a group on a single topic. I then set up a workshop on strategies for searching the web, during which group members actively sought out appropriate sites for their topics. This first phase would be complete with each member of the group writing a brief description and critique of a single web source (using a list of questions that I offered as a guide). Marcie, for example, offered this description of a site having to do with school violence:

- The site I picked from the Web is called "Preventing Violence in Schools." It is written by Mary Hatwood Futrel and Lee Etta Powell. The title of the site was in black capitalized letters inside a box with red fire flames. The site was broken down into ten sections. The section I picked is called "most likely victims of school violence." . . . This section gives you two victims that are in danger of school violence: students and teachers. It also give you three examples that cause violence: peer pressure, drugs and alcohol, and bias.
(Marcie)

Although she was not able to offer a genuine critique of the site beyond its surface features (for example, she was not prepared to evaluate the credibility and expertise of these authors), she was able to step back and consider the frame in which the information was being transmitted.

The next, and last, phase of the project involved the production of the pamphlet itself. I handed out models of pamphlets used in the Providence meeting the previous semester. Then I stipulated that their pamphlets should have a clearly stated point of view, be written in clear and grammatical sound language, be designed in an appealing and accessible format, and use authoritative and appropriate evidence from their web research, which should be cited. As we got more deeply into the project, I insisted on an action-component: a "here's what you can do" section.

I organized a workshop on the use of Microsoft Publisher, which I felt might be accessible and straightforward enough for novice users (in contrast with Pagemaker). I will admit that the workshop did not begin in the most efficacious way: I as well as my students were stumbling at first over the use of tools such as "text frames" and "word art." But the work, while always challenging for my students, proved creative and engaging as well. I am including in the appendix a sample of their work. When the pamphlets were completed, students presented their findings to the class at large, distributing their work to each member.

I don't pretend to claim that this project was without difficulties and glitches. Aside from those that I mentioned, a rather significant problem for me had to do with my requirement that students cite their sources in a kind of bibliography. That made the pamphlet seem like a traditional research paper, which of course it is not. Even with such a list, there was the danger that cutting and pasting might introduce wholesale plagiarism, as students drew from their web materials (they were limited to Internet research). These are problems, however, that are far from insurmountable, requiring simply more of my own intervention in the composing process.

Finally, and on a positive note, I found myself taken by a form of classroom writing that was rigorous, accessible to evaluation, and had uses outside of the classroom itself. The political pamphlet has a history as old as the country

itself and continues to thrive in the public domain as an instrument for change. I'm not claiming that each of my students went directly from my classroom to the nearest train or bus station or even student union to distribute their pamphlets. What I am saying is that their experience producing such work, whose material was drawn from publicly accessible web sites and on-line exchanges, may have begun to convince them that writing does indeed matter outside classroom walls.

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